

GUEST: AUNG SAN SUU KYI

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This special edition of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is brought to you in partnership with Pillars of Peace Hawaii, a program of the Hawaii Community Foundation.

If you feel that an issue can be settled only by going out and using violence, then obviously, you haven't thought of other ways. But there are always other ways, if you want to find them. It's a matter of patience, perseverance, and a determination that peace must prevail.

Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Join me for a conversation with former political prisoner turned political leader, Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma, or Myanmar. This Nobel Peace Prize winner spoke with me on her first visit to Hawaii. Next, on Long Story Short.

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There were many things that helped me to keep going through house arrest. But of course, the most important was inner resources. You have to have enough inside you that you may be able to survive, survive without others. It's not that I don't love my friends, and it's not that I don't like the company of other people. I like it, but I don't mind not having company either. So, that is one of the first things I learned about house arrest; how important it was to be able to live with yourself.

Respectfully known in her home country as The Lady, Aung San Suu Kyi has been the face of nonviolent resistance against Burma's military rule. Her unwavering courage and grace under fifteen years of house arrest captured attention worldwide. Now a member of Burma's Parliament, Aung San Suu Kyi made her first Hawaii visit in January of 2013, taking part in the Pillars of Peace Hawaii program presented by the Hawaii Community Foundation and the Omidyar Ohana Fund. She shared the importance of compassion, courage, and compromise in working for peace. With the cooperation of the Hawaii Community Foundation and the Rotary Global Peace Forum Hawaii, I was able

to talk one-on-one with Aung San Suu Kyi here in our PBS Hawaii studio in Honolulu.

In your life, you've experienced successes and setbacks, many of each, I would say. Where does your resilience come from?

Just from taking things day-by-day and keeping my eyes fixed on the final goal. I've learned over the years that everything looks less bad the next day. So, once you've learned that, then you can cope with everything, even when you're facing something which seems so serious and very disturbing, and you remember the fact the next day, you'll feel much better. You immediately feel better, you don't even have wait until the next day.

Even when you're imprisoned in your home?

Oh, house arrest was really no big deal. Not for me, anyway, because I didn't mind being isolated and I'm not the sort of person who likes going out a lot. So, it didn't mean that much to me.

What are the most important life lessons that have shaped you?

I suppose, the sense of duty. I talk about that more than anything else. It's just sort of instilled in me by my mother, who put a great value on a sense of responsibility. And when people ask me what I would like written on my grave, I always say, She did her duty. [CHUCKLE]

You're known for a wonderful speech you made about fear. It starts, It's not power that corrupts, but fear. Now, you've stood strong for a long time, but you're human, and the forces you oppose are very powerful. What, if anything, are you afraid of?

Oh, I'm afraid of not doing what I should do, of doing the wrong thing, making the wrong decisions. Those are the things I'm afraid of. I was never afraid of the people who put me under house arrest. I've got to say that they were never really that brutal to me; they simply put me under house arrest. I was not in the position of those of my colleagues who were taken into prison and tortured, and kept under terrible circumstances for years, and years, and years.

When you stand for peace and there's a repressive regime around, you're vulnerable, you are at risk. How does it feel, traveling with security or always being exposed to security?

I actually like the people who take care of my security. Most of them are very pleasant people. I think of them as people. Yes, they're looking after my security, but I appreciate what they're doing for me.

Does it make you think of what could happen? You know, look at them, they're standing in front of me in the window. That kind of thing.

No, no, no.

No?

I never think of what could happen. I just think how nice of them to be so nice about looking after me.

Does that come naturally, or did you have to hone your mind to not deal with certain issues?

No, it came quite naturally, because I do tend to see people as people rather than as performing beings.

Are you ever able to find humor in things that are preposterous and that hurt? For example, I think of your government in imprisoning you, saying that you were likely to undermine community peace. And I think of your convoy being attacked, and the government saying you're guilty, you're the victim but you're held responsible. It's so absurd.

Well, yes, it's absurd, and I'm fortunate in having a sense of humor. Sometimes, I used to think to myself, Well, you're a problem, aren't you? And I found this very funny, because I thought of myself as being a big problem for the military regime. And that to me seemed very funny, because after all, I was just one lone woman, and there they were, this great big tough regime, and treating me like a problem.

With a capital P.

Yeah; and capitalized throughout. I think work gives me hope. I have said repeatedly that there's no such thing as hope without endeavor. Hope without endeavor is simply a pipedream. And if we have real hope, we have to work towards it, and we have to work for it. And what kept me going, really, was commitment. I believed in what I was doing, and I always remembered that it was a choice I made. Nobody forced me to do what I did, and because it was a choice I had made out of my own free will, that was enough motivation for me to go on. And I believe that I have made the right choice.

That choice meant enormous personal sacrifices on the part of her family of two young sons and her husband, Oxford scholar Michael Aris. Faced with exile from her homeland if released from detention, she endured years of isolation and escaped two assassination attempts. She was only able to meet with her husband five times over ten years before his death from cancer in 1999. He was fifty-three years old. Aung San Suu Kyi's commitment to nonviolent resistance and peace earned her the Nobel Peace Prize, the United States Congressional Gold Medal, and numerous international awards, all while under house arrest.

If we want peace among ourselves, we have to learn about one another, including ourselves. And that requires courage. You have to have the courage to face what you have to do, as well as what you are, and you have to have the courage to recognize the truth in others, even if you do not agree with them. So, peace and courage are related, not because of the necessity to go out and march for peace, as some may think, but because of the necessity to be honest about what you may have to do in order to achieve peace. And peace is not easy to achieve.

The basis of conflict is the same everywhere, whether it's external or internal. It's an inability to make different aims harmonize. It's an inability for a peaceful compromise; that's why there is no peace. If you feel that an issue can be settled only by going out and using violence, then obviously, you haven't thought of other ways. But there are always other ways, if you want to find them. It's a matter of patience, perseverance, and a determination that peace must prevail.

But there are tradeoffs you have to make inside yourself. I mean, you talked about choices. And some of those choices are difficult.

Yes, choices are difficult, and sometimes you don't know whether you've made the right choice until sometime later, perhaps until it's too late. And sometimes, the choice that you've made may be even more right, more correct, better than you thought it might have been. Of course, sometimes, the choices are clear, but even the not so clear. For example, you go to a restaurant and make a simple choice like what you want to eat, then you might find that you rather prefer what somebody else is eating across the table. So, one can never be sure whether one's choices are the right ones, but I think you have to make them right. Once you've decided that this is the way you're going to go, you've got to make the best of it. And also, be prepared to change your mind if it's wrong. I don't think one should persist for the sake of vanity.

Are you pretty good about saying, I made a mistake?

I'm good about saying I made a mistake, and I do it quite quickly. Because I think the longer you put it off, the more difficult it becomes. And I can never understand people who are not prepared to say sorry or to say, I was wrong and I've changed my mind.

What about regrets; what regrets would you say you have?

You know, in Buddhism, it's considered unwholesome to wallow in regrets, because it stops you from going forward. And perhaps because of that, I certainly do not wallow in regrets. I mean, do I wish that some things had been different? Yes, of course. I think many human beings do. But you must learn from your past experiences.

It seems too easy. How can you do that?

Well, it's not that difficult [CHUCKLE] if you make a habit of it.

What about the people who oppose you, and who presumably have the same background and the same spiritual beliefs; what makes them so different in the methods they choose?

Perhaps the way they were taught. Perhaps the experiences they've been through. That's what makes people different from one another.

And do you think you can change people?

People can change themselves. They've got to want to change. So, you can only make people want to change themselves; you can't really change them.

You've talked about how you don't want to just see a regime change, you want to see a values change, which is just a fundamental transformation. How do you effect that?

A regime is made of people. It's people who need to change. And when they change, the values that govern the regime will change.

I can see why you take life a day at a time, because you were facing such a steep uphill climb, that it's so overwhelming to think of what needs to happen, so that's the only practical way to handle it, isn't it?

Well, you do need to have a vision. We were talking just now about climbing. If you're climbing a mountain, you have to know where the top is and what to expect at the top, and you've got to carry oxygen along if you want to go high enough and so on. But you have to take it a day at a time. The climb has to be done day-by-day, step-by-step, upwards, one hopes, all the time.

And you have a very concrete goal, as far as where that top is?

Yes, but this is not a goal that is ever reachable. Because even once we have managed to build up a democratic society, democratic form of government, it has to be preserved, people have to go on, and on, and on, making sure that the values are not eroded. I think you in the United States would understand that better than almost anybody else.

When I hear you speak, I hear passion and principle. And yet, to accomplish what you're using passion and principle to do, you need such detachment, as you've described. So, there's this dichotomy of passion and detachment.

I do not think they are opposites. Passion is just strong commitment, strong feelings, strong commitment. And detachment does not stop you from having strong commitment; it only helps you to make sure that you are able to achieve the goals to which you have committed yourself.

So, are you saying that when something comes along that's hurtful, you can just detach?

I think of criticism in this way; that if it's justified, then you have to be grateful for it, because it gives you an opportunity to improve yourself. But if it's not justified, I don't even need to think about it, I just brush it aside. I don't think that there's a conflict between passion and peace I think it's only the really passionate people who have been able to work for peace. When you think of Mahatma Gandhi, he was passionate about his beliefs. So was Martin Luther King. So, passion is a strong drive, a strong emotion, and whether you use it for positive or negative factors depends on yourself. Passion in itself is neither against or for peace, but you can use it for peace if you so wish. Absolute peace is unattainable. You still have to keep your eyes on it as somebody in a desert keeps his eye on the one guiding star that will lead him to salvation. So, that's very much like the navigator in the canoe, who must keep his eyes on the sun and the stars if he is to get to where he wants to get. So, it's the same thing with peace. You have to keep your eye on it. This has to be your ultimate goal, and you have to keep going towards it. It's not something you may ever reach, perfect peace, but you still have to keep on traveling towards that.

The former political prisoner is now part of the political establishment in a country struggling toward democracy and escape from poverty. A member of Parliament in Burma, or Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi chairs the main opposition party, the National League for Democracy.

Yes, I feel quite comfortable. I'm very adaptable. It's a lot of work, but as a dissident I also had to work very hard, so it just means more work. And I just take it as part of the new schedule.

It's more complex, isn't it? You have more constituencies, you're trying to work with people that you haven't gotten along with, or that you certainly haven't seen eye-to-eye with.

I still don't see eye-to-eye with some of them. In fact, I don't see eye-to-eye with some of my own people as well, I mean, some of the people in my own party. That's perfectly normal. And since we are a democratic party, we have been quite open about expressing our opinions, so we have always had to accept that everybody doesn't look at things the same way, not even those who are fighting for the same cause. I've repeatedly said over the last year or so that what we need to do most in Burma is to foster a culture of negotiated compromise. Because we are very weakened as the traditional values of our society are such that negotiated compromise is not familiar to us. So, I do talk about compromise.

That's a tricky area. It could alienate you from your base.

It may alienate me from some people, but I've always talked about compromise. I've always said that we want dialog in order that we may come to an understanding. I repeatedly defined dialog as give and take, which means that you have to take, but you have to give as well. Compromise requires courage, because compromise means letting go of your vanity. A lot of people do not compromise because they think that it's a sign of weakness. Of course, it's not a sign of weakness; compromise is a sign of strength. It requires courage to face the fact that you must learn to be satisfied with so much, and no more, even though you may want everything. You cannot have everything in this life, and you must be prepared to give up some things. This world was not made to be perfect, but I think we still can work towards perfection.

That's interesting. Because Arch Bishop Tutu was on this program, and he said it is a moral universe. But you're saying, Well, I don't think it was meant to be peaceful.

I don't think you can interpret it in this way. I think human nature is such that perfect peace is well nigh impossible, but that does not mean that we cannot have a vision of the best possible kind of peace, and to work towards it.

And do you think it is a moral universe?

I think it is a moral universe in the sense that people basically know what is right and what is wrong. Once upon a time, everybody was killing everybody, and

nobody thought anything about it, I'm sure, in the Stone Age. You just go around thumping your club over whoever it was who got in your way. But we have moved on a lot, and even though there is still a lot of violence in this world, nobody would take it for granted that you can kill anybody you like and get away with it. We have moved along in the right way. Compassion is the most giving of all emotions. Only yesterday, I was talking about it, and I mentioned the fact that love is very close to hate, but compassion is totally removed from hatred. This is why compassion is essential to peace. Love is not enough for peace, because it could so easily turn to hate. It's too close to hate in some ways. But compassion is what recognizes the suffering in others. It's a desire to remove the suffering of others, it is the desire to put others at peace, and that in itself will give you peace. And peace has to be created by all sides concerned.

Your life has changed so much in very recent years, from not having left Burma or even your home very much as a result of your imprisonment, to traveling the world. What's that adjustment been like for you?

Well, I used to travel a lot before I went back to politics in Burma and spent years and years in house arrest. So, travel is not anything really new to me.

But now, you're followed by a global audience.

Yea; it's work. In Burma also, I'm followed by an audience, if you like. It may not be global, but politics is a public job. You work for the public. So, this is the same kind of work, in a different setting.

And especially these days, the public is not one group, but the constituencies are all over and they're very different, and they all hear what you have to say, and they all have different takes on it. How much time do you spend responding to different groups?

It depends on whether they want a response from me. I don't read everything that's written about me or my party, and I don't respond to everything. I just respond to what I think needs responding to. But if anybody puts a question to me, I'm always prepared to answer it. One of the things about having a wider audience is finding out how much people care. When I was in Europe, I was surprised at the number of people from Africa and the Middle East who knew what we had been doing, and who were so warm in their support, perfect strangers that I met on the street.

In taking your parliamentary job day-by-day, and also having a goal for your service, what's the most you believe you can accomplish during this term in Parliament?

What we have learned in Parliament is that we can work together with people who belong not just to other parties, but parties that have opposed us all along. And this is a good lesson for all of us. We have to cooperate, we have to work together. And there is a spirit of cooperation in our national assembly, a sense that we all belong to the legislature, and that makes us one, even if we come from different parties. Enough people have to be dedicated to change. Not all; doesn't have to be all. Democracy assumes that people do have different ideas.

And in this country, we always talk about how messy democracy is, and yet, it's the best way of governing we know. How do you feel about it?

I agree with that. I've often quoted Churchill, who said that it's not just better than other systems, it's not that it's perfect, it's not that it's without fault.

Do you think it's the best form of government?

It's the best form of government that human beings have been able to think up. We need rule of law in order that we may achieve peace. In those areas where people are insecure, in those places where there's fighting going on, where people are under threat, their lives are under threat all the time, we can't expect them to sit down and talk to one another and sort out their differences. And so, we need rule of law. We need people to feel secure, we need them to feel that they are protected by the law, that the law is there to protect them and to keep them from harming one another, rather than to oppress them and to make sure that they do what the government wants them to do. That is what law has been in our country for a long time. So, we want rule of law as a positive force that will help us to bring about inner peace, put an end to conflict within our society. And for that, we also need amendments to the constitution to make sure that our society becomes truly democratic.

Do you have any prediction as to what will happen in Burma in the next, say, five years?

Oh, I don't really believe in predictions. I believe in determination, and I'm determined that Burma, within five years, should be more democratic and more peaceful, much more than it is now.

But not perfectly peaceful?

It won't be perfectly peaceful in the sense that human beings cannot achieve perfect peace. But I hope it will be perfectly peaceful in the sense that conflict between different ethnic groups within Burma will have come to an end.

As the head of Burma's Main Opposition Party, Aung San Suu Kyi has rankled some of her supporters for her growing reticence about Burma's military human rights abuses and violent conflicts with its ethnic minorities. The Burmese public's strong backing of her is being tested as she pursues compromise with the military-backed Majority Party and other factions in Burma's political landscape. Whatever the future holds for Aung San Suu Kyi, the world will be watching. I'd like to thank Aung San Suu Kyi for sharing her long story short with us. And thank you for watching and supporting Hawaii's only member of the Public Broadcasting Service. I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou, 'til next time. Aloha.

For audio and written transcripts of this program, and all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit PBSHawaii.org.

Any thoughts on what kind of lessons Hawaii might have to offer the world in peace?

There's so many different people from so many different cultures living together in peace, and it's the obvious thing that Hawaii has to teach the world. Basically, the way in which people have learned to live together and in which they have learned to respect one another's cultures, that's very good.

It must be so hard, because you have to be thin-skinned enough to hear from people and to feel their pain, but thick-skinned enough to take incredible insult and threats of injury.

You can't have both thin skin and thick skin. That's a contradiction in terms. But you can have thin skin, and have a bit of armor as well.

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